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When the word 'covert' really stands for 'silly'

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When the 40th anniversary of the battle for Iwo Jima was observed last month, the memorial to the American forces was donated and dedicated by the family of John Wayne.

It struck some of us, at the time, as a most curious example of life imitating art: in this case, moving pictures. On reflection, it seems that that bluff persona of a hundred westerns and a dozen military epics may have been — may continue to be — a metaphor for what is good about us when we act openly, and what ails us when we conspire to international intrigue.

Whether you admire the Duke or not (or for that matter, Jimmy Stewart or Henry Fonda heroes), it's at least possible that they captured the quintessential American character, which is marked by an almost total incapacity for deception.

An FBI agent in Los Angeles is about to go on trial for conspiring in an alleged Soviet plot to infiltrate the FBI. What did he do? He got a telephone call from some-

body doing a bad Zsa zsa Gabor accent who wanted to meet him. So he met her. So he got arrested. When was the last time Henry Fonda would have trusted anyone who called him up and said: "I want to meet you."

We have hired an appalling cast of characters to overthrow the government of Nicaragua, including someone who's running around down there in a floor-length black robe and calling himself "The Priest of Death." He amuses the indigenous Nicaraguans, who call him "The Umpire." Not the vampire, the umpire, as in the object of derision who squats behind home plate and misses the calls.

Now John Wayne or Jimmy Stewart might put on an apron to help with the dishes, but I cannot quite imagine them flitting around the borders of some distant banana democracy in a black dress.

Name America's most famous spy. Nathan Hale? He regretted that he had only one life to give for his country. He also got caught. And confessed. And hanged. That is where we are in the historical espionage business: it is not one of our talents.

Last January's military mission in space was a typical performance. We could have said we were launching satellites to assess the world's agricultural potential. We could have said we were exploring the effects of weightlessness on Olympic gymnastic training. Not us. We said we were launching a secret, and careful observers of the budget process concluded, accurately, that we were launching a pair of spy satellites that had already been discussed in Congress.

The lame excuse for this parlous performance is that it's hard to run "covert" operations in an open society. That is not true. We built the atomic bomb to everyone's amazement and many people's dismay. What it is very hard to do in this society is play silly games.

You take the finest political minds of their generation and vast quantities of genuine US currency, and what do you get? The Watergate break-in, that's what you get. You get tape left on the locks.

We have no standards for spies. When we go out to hire them we collect a bunch of loonies and incompetents.

Part of the problem is simple mathematics. Seventy percent of the American people think we shouldn't be trying to overthrow the government of Nicaragua. You have to admit this cuts down on the number of available personnel for the mission. You start out to do something secret that doesn't have the genuine approval of the public, and you end up hiring people that have been holding their hands in candle flames.

That's what's wrong with covert operations in an open society; it has nothing to do with the open society, it has everything to do with hiring people who think they're much cleverer than the rest of us.

I suppose, thinking over William Buckley Jr.'s epigram, I'd rather have my Latin American foreign policy conducted by the first 2000 people in the New Haven telephone book than by the faculty of Yale University, or any other selective institution, including the CIA.

I realize that leaves 30 percent of the population wishing that the Duke could go down there and settle those Sandinistas' hash, but that, the rest of us think, really would be life imitating the movies.

M.R. Montgomery is a Globe columnist.